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Conclusion: the power of theatre

[pp. 259-67]

Michael Thompson

In her Foreword to this volume, Lisa Appignanesi comments that ‘censorship is a beast with many heads and flailing arms. It is worth fighting all of them.’ As Deputy President and President of English PEN between 2002 and 2011, Appignanesi has played a key role in the defence of freedom of expression and is keenly aware of the continuing relevance of censorship in the contemporary world. Many of the case studies offered here deal with theatre censorship as a historical phenomenon, with a particular focus on the right-wing dictatorships and communist regimes of the 20th century. Others, however, are much more recent and show that the beast is alive and flailing, in both authoritarian and democratic environments. Reports published by Index on Censorship and PEN International in 2013 and 2014 provide evidence from various parts of the world of continuing threats to theatremakers and freedom of expression in the theatre.

In May 2012, Zakaria Zubeidi was arrested by the Palestinian Authority and held until October, ‘thought to be targeted for his work with Freedom Theatre, a children’s drama group active in the northern West Bank’ (PEN International 2013: 81). Freedom Theatre, which works with children and young people in the Jenin refugee camp, has been harassed by both Palestinian and Israeli authorities.

In August 2012, a production in Uganda of Beau Hopkins's *The River and the Mountain* was banned on the grounds that the play promoted homosexuality. Following the premiere at a small venue, the planned transfer to the Ugandan National Theatre was cancelled and the British producer David Cecil was detained for five days on a charge of 'disobeying lawful orders'. Charges were dropped in February 2013 but Cecil and a member of the cast, Keith Prosser, were detained again and deported (PEN International 2014: 60-61). Also in Uganda in 2012, the authorities closed down a production of *State of the Nation*, 'a play that is critical of the president's government, highlighting alleged corruption and poor governance in the country' (PEN International 2013: 16).

In October 2012, religious groups and members of the Golden Dawn party staged violent demonstrations against a production in Athens of Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* (which features a gay Christ), threatening and attacking members of the cast and audience. The play was closed down and charges of 'insulting religion' and 'malicious blasphemy' were brought against the director Laertis Vasiliou, the producer and the actors (PEN International 2013: 50). Vasiliou, who is Albanian, received homophobic and racist threats (ILGA Europe 2013 and Mason 2013: 239).

In February 2013, the Palestinian writer, actor and theatre director Samah Abu Khattab was put on trial 'for her theatre work and her articles published in *Women's Voice* in which she criticises the situation of women's rights in Gaza under Hamas rule' (PEN International 2014: 257).

In September 2013, a performance by Belarus Free Theatre was raided by police, who took the names and passport numbers of performers and spectators. 'The company is split between those

living precariously in exile in London, and the rest who continue to work illegally and underground under appalling, oppressive conditions back in Minsk’ (Farrington 2013).

In January 2014, the Reduced Shakespeare Company was denied permission to perform their show *The Bible: The Complete Word of God (Abridged)* in a theatre belonging to Newtownabbey Borough Council in Northern Ireland. ‘Members of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), a political party with roots in the Free Presbyterian Church, called for the show to be axed fearing it would offend and mock Christian beliefs’ (Dancey 2014). The decision was reversed a few days later, in time for the two scheduled performances to take place.

And finally (for now), performances in Mumbai of the play *Ali J* were cancelled on police instructions in January 2014 as a result of protests and threats by a Hindu nationalist group. The company, Evam, responded to the ban by putting a recording of the play on YouTube (Kumar 2014). A year earlier, the leader of the theatre group Pareeksha, based in Chennai, had taken legal action after being forced by the police commissioner to accept last-minute cuts to a production of Vijay Tendulkar’s play *Kamala*. The Madras High Court found in his favour, declaring those provisions of the Tamil Nadu Dramatic Performances Act which empowered the authorities to prohibit ‘objectionable performances’ to be unconstitutional (Sangameswaran 2013), and in September 2014 an Indian Government law commission declared that such legislation ‘has no place in a modern democratic society’ and recommended repeal (Law Commission of India 2014: 24-25).

These recent examples feature a variety of different agents carrying out or advocating acts of censorship with varying degrees of coercion: governments, local authorities, and political,

paramilitary or religious groups, sometimes acting in accordance with legislation and sometimes outside the law or stretching its provisions. As always, political dissent and the transgression of religious or moral precepts are the two primary targets of censorship and tend to be entangled with one another. And as always, censorship is exercised ostensibly in defence of the national or community interest, protecting a social and discursive order deemed to be more valuable than freedom of expression.

What I would like to highlight in these examples, however, is the persistence of theatremakers in exercising their creative freedom in the face of onerous, violent or even deadly constraints. Success in overturning bans or getting the law changed is rare, but the effectiveness of theatre in critically examining political and cultural pressure points and challenging assumptions about acceptability is constantly reaffirmed. A novel component of the tension between freedom of theatrical expression and those who seek to limit it is the use of digital media. Evam in India and Vasiliou in Greece have been attacked online but – like Belarus Free Theatre – have made enterprising use of YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and other social and news media to keep their work in public view and argue the case for their right to produce it. The fight to which Appignanesi refers is waged not only by campaigning organisations, but also by artists simply continuing to make theatre that engages with important issues and taking responsibility for the social repercussions of their creative decisions.

Catherine O’Leary’s introduction to this volume demonstrates, drawing in particular on Foucault and Bourdieu, that censorship must be seen as a continuum ranging from the unconscious self-control built into social structures and discursive practices, through bureaucratic regulation or unofficial influence, right up to detention and physical violence. Foucault’s model of the

‘automatic functioning of power’ (1979: 201) and Bourdieu’s notion of ‘structural censorship’ working ‘through the medium of the sanctions of the field’ (1991: 138) are powerful tools for apprehending the ‘big picture’ of censorship, but there is a risk inherent in using them: that the effectiveness or comprehensiveness of these processes of implicit disciplining of thought, speech and movement may be overestimated. Our case studies and the recent examples discussed above all demonstrate that implicit or structural censorship is never complete or perfect. The act of resorting to explicit censorship confirms that the control mechanisms are not working automatically, making the suppressed work of art all the more effective in highlighting faultlines in the discursive order.

Those who carry out explicit institutional censorship tend to claim that they are doing so on the assumption that the underlying processes of implicit censorship are on the whole working successfully, creating a generally accepted consensus which is nevertheless often threatened by the disruptive actions of a minority and therefore needs to be constantly policed. Implicit censorship is necessarily imperfect, never completely successful or embedded, partly because its parameters can never be completely defined, delimited or fixed. Authoritarian regimes tend to be reluctant to accept this reality. They blame particular individuals or groups, especially artists, for perversely refusing to fit in with the norms supposedly shared by everyone else and take action to punish or silence them – or, more paternalistically, offer to help them correct their accidental infringements. Explicit censorship is thus exercised ostensibly on behalf of the ‘everyone else’ (those who have successfully internalised the rules of the field and censor themselves automatically), supposedly to uphold a natural consensus. The ideal outcomes for the censors are, on the one hand, to create the illusion that implicit censorship *has* worked, by means of suppressing the evidence of its failure, and on the other, to instil deterrence into the cultural

system, inducing artists to censor themselves in advance (building censorship into the habitus that enables them to continue to operate in the cultural field).

However, the ‘performative contradiction’ of power ‘stating what it does not want stated’ (Butler 1997: 130) applies both at the level of making implicit censorship work ‘on its own’ and at the level of exercising overt censorship as an instrument of deterrence: the more distinctly the lines are drawn, the more the unspeakable is acknowledged and the easier it becomes for cultural producers to find spaces in which to operate just outside those lines.

Implicit censorship aims to work on various levels (across multiple ‘markets’ in Bourdieu’s terms), regulating not only forms of language, social behaviour, expressions of religious or political commitment, manifestations of sexuality and so on, but also the norms of particular cultural fields – the appropriateness of such topics being represented in particular cultural forms and practices. Everyone operating within the market of theatre is expected to have internalised its rules, its specific inflections of ‘habitus’ and ‘bodily hexis’: ‘If one wishes to produce discourse successfully within a particular field, one must observe the forms and formalities of that field’ (Bourdieu 1991: 20). Implicit censorship can therefore fail to work (or work only partially) on any of those levels, which leads explicit institutional censorship to police not only conformity to general expectations but also to norms of genre, commercial markets and professional practice.

The claim invariably made by those who exercise explicit censorship to be acting in defence of a social, political, moral or aesthetic consensus always has some justification. Individuals and social groups will tolerate, support or even demand acts of censorship in order to avoid having their sense of integration into the social and discursive order destabilised or, more calculatingly,

to protect particular interests in which they have a stake. The smaller that group is, the more severe and comprehensive the censorship is likely to be and the easier it is to condemn. The supporters of an act of explicit censorship may even constitute a majority of people in a given society at a given time, but that majority will be temporary and the achievement of real consensus will always be difficult to substantiate objectively. The unstable, circumstantial nature of such a consensus means that it does not in itself constitute a complete principled justification for censorship.

The case studies offered by our contributors feature a fascinating range of forms of supposed consensus being defended – and in the process constructed – by agents of censorship. The communist regimes studied by Tyszká and Ostrowska (Poland), Baker (East Germany), Poniž (Yugoslavia) and Gombár (Hungary) were all concerned above all to maintain the illusion that the political and economic system was working and had the support of the majority of the people. A key component of the illusion was the idea that artists (mostly) played a useful part in sustaining the revolutionary spirit. These are the regimes that were most inclined to pretend that explicit censorship was not taking place. Poniž talks of ‘invisible censorship’, Gombár emphasises that cultural control in Hungary was mostly indirect, and Baker quotes Erich Honeker’s claim that in the GDR ‘we had no censorship. [...] With us it was about the shaping of political consciousness’. In Poland, theatre censorship was more conspicuous but still not officially labelled as such: Ostrowska highlights the euphemism ‘control’ as an example of the Polish state’s construction of a ‘belief in the near-magical power of words to shape reality’. What is underlined by all these chapters is the extent to which the long social reach of the Party in these countries, permeating all levels of government and cultural administration, meant that the operation of censorship was distributed across multiple agencies, locations and stages of the

process of producing a play. In this kind of environment, many acts of censorship are informal, arbitrary and unrecorded.

In contrast, the right-wing regimes studied by O'Connor and Merino (Spain), Cabrera and Gombár (Portugal) and Gomes and Casadei (Brazil) practised theatre censorship in a more centralised, bureaucratic and officially acknowledged way, albeit managed by ministries euphemistically responsible for 'Education' and 'Information'. They equipped themselves with legislation declaring general principles and stipulating procedures, kept detailed records of censors' decisions, and even (by the mid-1960s) began to engage in public debate about the need for cultural control. Their corporatist single parties – the Falange in Spain, the National Union in Portugal and the Integralist movement in Brazil – enjoyed much more limited hegemony than the Eastern European Communist parties, competing with other religious and military power structures, which were also involved directly and indirectly in theatre censorship. The consensus that Franco's, Salazar's and Vargas's censors were charged with protecting was to some extent blurred by this dispersion of power, but coalesced around the primacy of social order, seen as guaranteed by traditional authority, conservative Catholicism, bourgeois moral values and national unity. The contrast identified by Gombár between Hungary and Portugal is generally applicable to the twentieth century. Communist regimes tended to value theatre (including experimental forms) and aim to use it to legitimise and lend cultural prestige to the Party's political and ideological control. In contrast, right-wing dictatorships tended to display suspicion or even contempt towards the arts, allied to conservative attitudes towards aesthetics, and concentrated on keeping theatre quiet rather than attempting to exploit it.

The case of contemporary Iran (discussed by Goldman) could be seen as combining characteristics of both systems. The influence exerted by religious institutions over Iran's official censorship apparatus (principally the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance), the obsessive focus on conservative moral values, and the generally suspicious attitude towards artistic creativity are reminiscent of the dictatorships of Spain, Portugal and Brazil, while its all-pervading system of overt and implicit censorship and surveillance is comparable to the webs of control created by communist parties. The main ideological construct being upheld by censorship is the definition of Iranianness in terms of the inseparability of politics and religion: all expressions of dissent can be condemned as anti-Islamic or the product of foreign interference (or both).

Western democracies have been able to make more convincing claims to legitimacy in exercising censorship in defence of social and moral consensus, and have certainly been more willing to allow open debate about the subject. In the period leading up to the abolition of theatre censorship in the UK in 1968, there was a fascinating exchange of views in parliament and the media between politicians, playwrights, critics, journalists, academics, censors, theatre managers and performers, some of whom argued forcefully in favour of censorship. However, there has always been a degree of misrepresentation or disingenuousness in the assumption of shared values: the real work of implicit and explicit censorship in these societies is to conceal the ways in which democracy is limited or can be manipulated. The case studies presented by Nicholson (the UK), Ó Drisceoil (Ireland), Houchin (the USA) and Cremona (Malta) show theatre censorship being carried out in various ways to protect the interests or sensibilities of particular social groups, the reputation of particular institutions, or specific policy objectives of governments.

The politically unaccountable function politely exercised by the Lord Chamberlain in the UK was a perfect embodiment of the disguised hegemony of the British establishment – discreet and pragmatic but prepared to act ruthlessly in protecting the reputation of the monarchy, the government's relations with foreign powers or polite society's distaste for drawing attention to homosexuality. A new consensus has formed in British society around the primacy of human rights and the tolerance of cultural diversity, but Goldman's discussion of recent controversies highlights how fragile that consensus is and reveals how confused and superficial public debate on these issues can be. With reference to Ireland, Ó Drisceoil's chapter acknowledges the obvious phenomenon of the political and cultural dominance of Catholicism (in the form of the Church hierarchy as well as a network of pressure groups), but, more interestingly, emphasises the less obvious information management operation to safeguard the fiction of Irish neutrality during World War II. Although the final outcome of the case of *Hair* in the USA is an encouraging confirmation of the efficacy of enshrining the principle of freedom of expression in a constitution and clarifying its interpretation through judicial argument, the story reveals how vulnerable that principle was and how frequently it had been violated by local authorities and private sector bodies. On achieving independence in 1961, Malta equipped itself with a bill of rights but did not repeal colonial-era theatre censorship legislation that conflicted with it until fifty years later. The censorship unobtrusively practised there until brought out into the open by the case of *Stitching* helped to conceal a systemic tension between the image of a modernised, liberal member state of the European Union and a society still influenced by traditional social structures and values.

Censorship as a legacy of colonialism is central to Subedi's chapter on India (and Nepal) and Zenenga's on Zimbabwe. The British Raj exercised censorship in the name of public order, but as Subedi argues, this was also a way of inhibiting the development of local forms of performance and encouraging the adoption of British models of theatre. The colonial legislation deployed for that purpose was then recycled after 1947 in Dramatic Performances Acts passed by Indian states which have become instruments for the pursuit of nationalist and religious agendas. The supposed consensus protected by censorship in Zimbabwe is the core legitimising myth that Mugabe's dictatorship is a continuation of the anti-colonial struggle. ZANU was keen to use popular theatre as a propaganda weapon as part of the campaign against white minority rule and the consolidation of an independent Zimbabwe, only to condemn its practitioners later as agents of imperialist destabilisation. Mugabe's regime has maintained a veneer of constitutional propriety while ruthlessly manipulating legislative instruments inherited from the former colonial power in order to suppress dissent.

The case studies presented in this volume are diverse and our contributors take a variety of approaches to the discussion of theatre censorship. Nevertheless, some useful general conclusions can be derived from bringing these different perspectives together. What emerges most forcefully and immediately is confirmation of the omnipresence of censorship over the past century or so, working in many different ways and practised by various agents. We have also seen evidence of a corresponding variety of responses by theatremakers: unconscious or conscious self-censorship; negotiation and compromise; evasion and subterfuge; coded messages and development of new theatrical languages; defiance and legal challenges. The second principle that has been demonstrated and illustrated is that censorship apparatuses and practices reflect the specific characteristics of the political and cultural systems in which they are deployed at particular times,

and reveal interesting things about those systems and circumstances. All manifestations of censorship are fraudulent in some respect, in that they conceal the real aims that lie behind them, claiming to be for public benefit and in line with majority opinion but in practice tending to be used to defend particular sectional interests.

All the case studies presented reveal some degree of unease on the part of the censors – uncertainty about whether they are reading texts and performances accurately, anxiety about slippages in the grip of implicit censorship and fear of the potential power of theatre. The key threat posed by art, whether it is openly political or not, is that it exposes the operation of implicit censorship by inviting readers, viewers or listeners to consider the social and ideological implications (the signifying power) of what is meant to be taken for granted as part of banal everyday activity: language use, social behaviours, values and relationships. As Jacques Rancière argues, aesthetics is essentially political: ‘It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience’ (Rancière 2004: 13). Explicit censorship aims to limit art’s success in performing the task of uncovering implicit censorship, or at least to ensure that it does not make the exposure too obvious.

Theatre exposes the workings of implicit censorship particularly comprehensively, as it ‘disturbs the clear partition of identities, activities, and spaces’ (Rancière 2004: 13). It shows in a very direct and immediate way how social relations and discourses are inscribed in moving bodies and in ways of speaking and behaving (in Bourdieu’s terms, ‘bodily hexis’ and ‘articulatory styles’), and offers audiences opportunities to respond in real time and real space. It therefore poses a particularly complex challenge for censors, who aim to control not only verbal texts but the ways

in which they are pronounced and inflected, embodied in space, and received by particular audiences in particular places. Our case studies bring out the importance of theatremakers displaying courage and determination – to produce unauthorised discourse and test the limits of what is assumed to be acceptable – and being allowed to make their own judgements about how to use the power of theatre responsibly.

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